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UNCLAS PANAMA 001134

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN, DS/ITA, DS/IP/WHA, DS/LECC
SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
VANCOUVER FOR CG ARREAGA

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: PANAMA CSS REFORM DEMONSTRATIONS BEGIN IN EARNEST

11. (SBU) ON MONDAY, MAY 23, THE FIRST ROUND OF DEBATES IN PANAMA'S NATIONAL ASSEMBLY CONTINUED AMID ROWDY, MAINLY STUDENT-LED DEMONSTRATIONS IN PRINCIPAL STREETS OF THE CITY, AND AT LEAST 70 ARRESTS. POLICE REPORTED STUDENTS WERE CARRYING KNIVES, MOLOTOV COCKTAILS, PLIERS, AND PETARDS. SOME WORE MASKS. CURRENTLY, THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY HAS NO PLANS TO ASK FOR A SECOND TEN-DAY ROUND OF DEBATES FOR THE REFORM PACKAGE PRESENTED BY THE RULING DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTIONARY PARTY (PRD MEANING THE SOCIAL SECURITY (CSS) REFORMS COULD BE PASSED IN THE PRD-CONTROLLED ASSEMBLY THIS WEEK. PANAMENISTA PARTY POLITICIANS HAVE INFORMED EMBASSY PERSONNEL THAT THE ASSEMBLY WILL MOST LIKELY PASS THE PACKAGE WITH ONLY MINOR CHANGES, AND WITH LITTLE OR NO OPPOSITION INPUT. PANAMENISTA MANUEL GRIMALDO VOICED CONCERN THAT OPPOSITION, LABOR, AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS WERE NOT BEING CONSULTED IN THE DEBATE SESSIONS, JUST AS THEY HAD FEARED. GRIMALDO ATTENDED SESSIONS SUNDAY, MAY 22, DURING WHICH NEITHER HEALTH MINISTER ALLEYNE NOR CSS DIRECTOR GENERAL LUCIANI WERE PRESENT. LUCIANI SENT HIS SECRETARY GENERAL INSTEAD. GRIMALDO ALSO SAID THAT PRD LABOR COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN LEANDRO AVILA HAS PRIVATELY TOLD THE OPPOSITION HE WAS CONFIDENT THE REFORMS WILL PASS.

12. (U) MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS, WHICH WERE SMALLER THAN EXPECTED, HAS BEEN SENSATIONALIST, HOWEVER, STUDENTS, POLICE, AND A REPORTER DID SUFFER MINOR INJURIES. THE MINISTRY OF GOVERNMENT AND JUSTICE AND NATIONAL POLICE HELD A PRESS CONFERENCE THIS AFTERNOON TO APPEAL FOR DIALOGUE. THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION ALSO CANCELED CLASSES AT THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE, THE SCHOOL FROM WHICH MOST OF THE STUDENTS INCITING DEMONSTRATIONS CAME.

13. (U) POST HAS ISSUED A WARDEN MESSAGE, AND THERE HAVE BEEN NO DISRUPTIONS IN EMBASSY OPERATIONS. POST WILL PROVIDE UPDATES AS WEEK'S EVENTS UNFOLD.
WATT